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Editorial: Black Bear pride means protecting students from hate speech

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Editorials (<https://mainecampus.com/category/opinion/edits/>), Opinion (<https://mainecampus.com/category/opinion/>) | November 4, 2019

On Wednesday, Oct. 30, Rep. Lawrence Lockman arrived at the University of Maine campus to give a keynote presentation at the "Crisis at the Border; A Citizen's Guide to Resisting Racist Immigration Policies in Maine" event, organized by the UMaine College Republicans. It did not take long for many UMaine students and alumni to condemn this visit, citing evidence of violent, discriminatory and hateful statements made by Lockman in the past. The controversy stirred up by Rep. Lockman's visit is a perfect example for how UMaine, its students and its administration need to take a moment to reassess how we discuss ideas, ensure student safety and encourage inclusivity and diversity.

When events are inherently political, such as when a Maine representative is brought to campus, it can be hard to step back and examine the circumstances and results of the event from a perspective beyond bipartisan politics. But in this particular case, the controversy between upset students and extremist speakers or groups are more than a recurring political problem, they are a moral issue. Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, Independent, and all political affiliations aside, there is no denying that the way our campus has engaged in debates has been less than constructive.

UMaine students are no longer safe when organizations on this campus bring in individuals who have no regard for the humanity of those who do not look exactly like them or have the same values in order to spread their messages of separation and ignorance.

On this campus, student safety and acceptance should be the highest priority. Every student deserves an environment that fosters learning in a productive setting, and this cannot be done when their existence is questioned and devalued by hate speech.

Many people disagree on the line that divides free speech and hate speech. While there is no exact legal definition of hate speech, just as there is no legal definition of rudeness or unpatriotic speech, the American Library Association defines hate speech as "any form of expression through which speakers intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a group or class of persons," with particular intention to divide on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age or disability.

UMaine has a free speech and assembly policy, that reads: "there should be no restrictions placed on the fundamental rights to free speech and assembly except those necessary to protect the rights of others and to preserve the order necessary for the University to function as an institution of higher learning."

An institution of higher learning can only function when its students feel safe. When hate speech, such as the statements made by Lockman, are spread on campus, the rights of minority groups on campus are questioned. Hate speech is not free speech. Attempting to use freedom of speech as a scapegoat for promoting hateful ideas should not and can not be tolerated on a campus that promotes itself as a believer of diversity and inclusivity.

When extremists come to campus, especially those who have been credited with violent quotes against women, hateful statements against minorities and more, it is easy, and valid, to respond with anger. But the loudest and angriest voices are not the most effective.

As a campus, we should move forward in new ways that will foster constructive environments for beneficial discussions of issues, where all voices and identities feel safe, heard, and valued, instead of threatened, delegitimized and unjustly dismissed.

Students can work toward providing a safe environment for everyone by acting on their right of assembly to protest unjust speakers and events, holding their peers accountable for potentially harmful and discriminatory views and to engage in conversations that show you understand one perspective but would like to respectfully suggest another. On an administration level, UMaine should implement a system where students can voice their concerns for the speakers, visitors and other events that are being hosted on our campus.

If we are truly a campus that actively works to protect and represent all of its students, there needs to be serious changes on how we handle controversy and discussions that involve students' wellbeing. We cannot accept hateful speech, we cannot endorse hateful actions and we must be open to learning and developing our perspectives moving forward.



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ryanrrobbins • a year ago

This is one of the saddest and most ridiculous things I have ever read in the opinion pages of this newspaper. If you do not believe in protecting speech you find distasteful or offensive, you don't believe in free speech or the First Amendment at all.

2 ^ | ^ • Reply • Share

Dr. Ed ryanrrobbins • 10 months ago

It's not even that as much as who is going to defend YOUR free speech when political tides turn and YOU are in the minority.

I remember when the University of Maine was an incredibly conservative institution -- and it was the Wilde Stein Club that needed the defense of free speech. (There is a reason why they named it after Oscar Wilde & Gertrude Stein.)

And I remember when the Board of Trustees wanted to shut down the *Maine Campus* after they reported (accurately) that a university administrator had plead guilty to sexually assaulting minors on campus -- printing the (accurate & public) facts of the case, along with the fact that he had plead down to the lesser crime of simple assault.

Yes, the First Amendment is the only reason why her newspaper is still there --- and it is what will protect her in the future from politicians such as Rep. Lockman, whom she likely will be writing negative things about in the future.

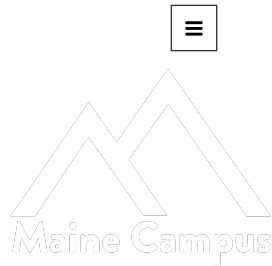
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Ollie • a year ago

I agree that the speaker is repugnant but there is no legal distinction between "free speech" and "hate speech". The exceptions to the first amendment are extraordinarily narrow and few, and hate speech is not among them. As the courts have traditionally considered public universities to be a branch of the State, their hands are tied with regard to restricting any speech that does not fall within any first amendment exceptions.

1 ^ | ^ • Reply • Share





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